

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Sean Sweeney

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Sean Sweeney conducted by Interviewer Yukie Ohta on October 31, 2023. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Sean Sweeney's first experience with community preservation in SoHo was through his involvement with a private weekly dance party called The Loft, where he worked. Although he and a neighborhood group, the SoHo Artists Association, were on opposing sides of whether the dance party should be permitted to operate, he got a sense of the residents' then-new tradition of defining what the neighborhood would or wouldn't be.

Over a decade later, in the early 1990s, he attended a community board meeting after seeing a flier posted by another neighborhood group, the SoHo Alliance, about changes on his block. Before long, his loft became the meeting place for the group, he became its spokesperson, and, unceremoniously, its executive director. In this role, he's stewarded the group through many battles to define and preserve SoHo.

In this interview, Sweeney explains the origins and operations of the SoHo Alliance, including its involvement in efforts related to rezoning, and lawsuits against New York University, SoHo Trump Hotel, and the State Liquor Authority. He also describes the Landmark Preservation Commission's lawsuit to preserve Frosty Myers' *The Wall*, and outlines criticism of the power of business improvement districts in the city with specific examples related to the SoHo Broadway Initiative.

Transcriptionist: Azure Bourne

Session: 1

Interviewee: Sean Sweeney

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Yukie Ohta

Date: October 31, 2023

Q: My name is Yukie Ohta and I am here with Sean Sweeney, Executive Director of the SoHo Alliance, at his home on Greene Street in New York City, to conduct an oral history interview for the New York Preservation Archive Project. Today is October 31, 2023. Sean, is it okay for me to record this interview?

Sweeney: Yes.

Q: Okay. Well, then let's get started. Please tell us your name, once again, and give us a one to two-sentence self-introduction.

Sweeney: My name is Sean Sweeney. I've been living in SoHo since around 1977.

Q: So you have a very interesting origin story that placed you at odds with the SoHo Alliance at one point in time. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

Sweeney: Yeah. I used to attend, in NoHo—at 647 Broadway, north of Bleecker—a private house party called The Loft, that went from basically midnight until eight o'clock, but then it had to close there. The buildings department closed them down, the neighbors complained, so they went to 99 Prince Street. And coincidentally, I happened to move into the same building right

around the same time, by pure coincidence. So here's a place that I was attending, a wonderful private party—the origins of disco and house music, actually—and in my own building. I was also getting employed there.

And I thought they were unfairly branding us—the SoHo Artists Association—because they thought it was going to introduce nightclubs and discotheques into this very quiet neighborhood. So there were fliers on the lampposts saying, “Come to a meeting. No discotheques, no juice bars. Danger Danger Danger.” We're just a bunch of innocent people dancing. So I'm just a spook—undercover kind of freak, by nature—so I volunteer. I said to David Mancuso, “I'll go as a spy, and hear what they have to say, and report back to you.” And David Mancuso, whose home it was and who ran the party and deejayed, goes, “Okay.” So I just went, and there were only about two of us there. There was a woman from The Loft, and myself, and Charles Leslie, who was very involved with the SoHo Artists Association. And maybe, just no more than three or four other people at the most, from SoHo, from the Artists Association. I guess they didn't know me, or her, because they were, “Who are you?” I forget what she said. She said, “Well, I'm a resident.” They said, “Okay.” And he goes, “And you?” “I'm a reporter for the *Village Voice*.” Understand, the CIA would always be reporters.

So I just reported back. They wanted to shut us down. There was a demonstration of maybe about fifty people. “No discos in SoHo.” And it wasn't really a disco, it was a private party, but—

Q: It happened on a regular basis though.

Sweeney: Yeah, every Saturday night. But it was a private party in someone's loft, and they said it was a club—and that's how he was able to get around the law. It was a private party, it wasn't a nightclub.

So there was really no trouble. The neighbors next door didn't like the thumping of the bass speakers. But even people from the building didn't complain. So in other words, it was a mountain out of a molehill. They really searched for a solution for which there was no problem. And then we got along well after. We tried to keep things down and there was no problem. And that was the last I got involved with anything to do with SoHo community activism for about thirteen years.

Q: So what happened in the interim? And then, how did the SoHo Alliance form, and how did you become involved in it?

Sweeney: Well, the SoHo Artists Association was formed around 1968 to legalize residential living in SoHo. And when that was accomplished in '71 with the rezoning, and then in 1972—excuse me, 1973 it got landmarked. And they were involved with that as well, the preservationists. [00:05:01] And it got kind of quiescent. Except around '78, they also, I think, passed a zoning amendment to prohibit clubs because The Loft, at which I worked, which is even really ironic. And after that, it was really not much to do. I think they also had, around 1975, a zoning amendment not to have sidewalk cafés. So this is why I had great antipathy to the sidewalk dining sheds that now are everywhere because for fifty years, we fought to keep them

out, because, you know, it was continental. On the Champs-Élysées they're nice, but not on the gritty streets of New York.

Q: But then you came back. How did you get reinvolved with SoHo Alliance?

Sweeney: Well, again, I wasn't involved in the community. I was involved just with my friends and kind of the downtown scene, whatever that was, of miscreants. And I think—okay, there was a church called Saint Alphonsus located on West Broadway, between Grand and Canal on the west side, which was demolished because, I think, the foundations were getting weak. And for a couple of years there was a huge empty lot—I don't know, twenty or thirty thousand square feet—and I believe someone either wanted to build a recreation center, and this group, the SoHo Alliance, was formed. And there was also a second attempt to build like a twelve-story building, which over-towered all the other buildings in our low rise neighborhood, with the exception of Broadway, which has some taller buildings. So that's when the SoHo Alliance got started. It was an amalgamation of the now moribund SoHo Artists Association, the Downtown Independent Democrats (of which I am now an officer), the Greene Street Block Association, and the “Southwest SoHo Preservation Association,” or some name like that. But again, I wasn't really involved in that, cause that was down all the way on Canal Street, and I'm up here at Houston, so it's almost a different neighborhood.

However, about 19—okay, I was involved in the [19]60s with the anti-war movement, and then in the '70s and '80s with the Irish Republican Army, I belonged to an affinity group here. And then when the peace treaty came—when peace was approaching, around 1990 or so—I saw on

the lamppost, a sign from the community board that said something like “The Restoning of Greene and Prince.” They were gonna replace the Belgian blocks. And at the same time I also saw a flier from the SoHo Alliance that said “Stop The Hotels.” Because Greene Street was my street, I just figured, “Well, I better go. I should find out what they’re gonna do to my street.” So that was my first community board meeting.

But then I saw the list of buildings that sought to be converted to hotels. One of them was 99 Prince, also known as 147 Mercer on the northwest corner of Mercer and Prince. And it kind of got me annoyed cause I’d lived there from about ‘77 till about ‘81, at which time a new landlord, a real estate developer called Futterman, bought it, and said, “You guys, you’re out. We’re not renewing your commercial lease.” And we said, “Well, we’re not moving.” And he said, “Well, you have to move.” This is before the Loft Law, which gave some protections to loft tenants, similar to rent stabilized tenants. It gave them permanency of residency. We didn’t have that, so we got a law firm, and we went on rent strike for about two years. And then, eventually, Futterman gave us about twenty-three thousand each. We also saved about two thousand in rents. So I had about twenty-five thousand I moved out. But it was disruptive. I really liked living there, it was ideal. It was the apex of SoHo, like in the late ‘70s, before it got really commercialized. Twenty-five by a hundred-foot loft, thirteen windows. Freezing cold in the winter. No intercom. A hot plate. But it was lovely, and it was just really a nice time in my life. And to have lost that, I got a lot of resentment.

So when they were gonna make a fancy hotel out of this, with people?! One of the developers, André Balazs, he owned a club, or a discotheque called M.K. And I thought it was so ironic. This

private party at which I worked, The Loft at 99 Prince Street, Balazs copied. M.K. was like the downtown Studio 54. All the elite models and yuppies, they would go there. And you're throwing our little party out? It was like, it really got me really "F You" kind of attitude.

So I went to one or two meetings. I just got involved. [00:10:01] The Alliance would have meetings up here in my loft. For some reason, people didn't want to use their house, so we had meetings here. Before answering machines, there was something called answering services, where an operator would be in a room somewhere in midtown, taking calls from people and messages. And then the client would call and say, "What messages did I get?" and get a list of messages. So I checked the answering service one September, and the operator said, "You have a whole summer's worth of phone messages here." I go, "Man." One call was someone who worked for the *Daily News*. And I was also involved in the Yippies, who were like political hippies in the '60s, and they really knew how to manipulate the media. And I go, "Aw man, we're passing up the *Daily News*, the *New York Times*, this is crazy." So I said, "Why're we doing this? How come no one called up in two or three months?" And they said, "Uh, I don't know." And I said, "You know, there's something just out now called answering machines. Why don't we get one?" And everyone just looked at me. And you know, if you're gonna suggest something, you can't be a jerk and say nothing—so I said, "Okay, I'll get it." So we put the answering machine in a corner and I became the spokesperson for the SoHo Alliance. And I give good quote. So when the reporters did call, I gave them spicy little things, little quips and things like that.

Q: That's what your famous for, Sean.

Sweeney: [laughs] Do you want to hear how I became the executive director?

Q: Yes.

Sweeney: Kind of a funny story. It has to do with the SoHo Grand Hotel. So we were gonna sue on environmental grounds, that there were gonna be like two hundred rooms, and it was built on the Lispenard swamp by Canal Street, just south of Spring Street. A lot of water. And if you have two hundred people flushing toilets at eight o'clock in the morning, taking showers, it's going to flood. And there was flooding—there's still flooding to this day. That's another story, how to mitigate that flooding.

So we sued and we needed money, so they had an art exhibit, "SOS: Save Our SoHo." That was one of the—except for the SoHo rezoning, that was one of the last community-wide, SoHo-wide efforts. And a lot of famous artists gave their paintings and stuff like that. So at the same time, around 1993—now we're moving to 1994—nothing much was happening. People began to sell stuff on the sidewalks, which I thought was expropriation, the usurpation of public property for private use. You get one guy selling something, then you're gonna have twenty, which is what happened. So I tried to get the police to chase them away. And one of the artists was very vocal and political. He led a group to oppose us opposing him. And so we had a meeting how to deal with this. Did we want to stop artists selling their work on the street. Because here we are, a neighborhood of artists not wanting artists to sell. It was a quandary. But eventually, people said, "Well, you know, we just can't have people selling on the street." So I was organizing all these

meetings. But people—I don't want to mention names—but some people were doing a lot of talking, but not doing the work. Too many chiefs, not enough indians.

So we had another meeting for something else, another kind of major meeting. We were setting it up with the table in the front, with like six chairs for the steering committee, and then the audience, twenty or thirty. It was in an art gallery on Grand Street. And Kathryn Freed, who was a good friend of mine and a city council member—and a member of the SoHo Alliance, and one of the earliest members of the Downtown Independent Democrats—she said, “Sean, move these other chairs away and you sit up front alone, directing the meeting.” [laughs] I got there early to set up. So I'm sitting there, there's no other chairs for the other members to sit on. I'm sitting, the lone guy behind the table, and that's it. That's it.

Q: That's how you became executive director?

Sweeney: Really Machiavellian, isn't it? If I'm gonna do like all of the work—I was doing like ninety percent of the work—I want, you know, more control. [00:15:01] I don't like meetings or committees, it's too many chiefs. So that's how I became executive. Oh, I worked as a freelancer for all these years. I was a taxi driver. I was a delivery guy, and worked at The Loft as a freelancer. So I always thought it would be nice to be an executive director. A big shot [laughs]. So like Napoleon crowning himself emperor, I crowned myself executive director. It's very impressive on business cards [laughs].

Q: Okay. Well to me, and probably to many others, you are the SoHo Alliance now, and for

many years. So can you just tell me a little bit about the SoHo Alliance? Like does it have a mission, fundraising, staffing, general activities? Who are members?

Sweeney: Actually, around 1995 or 1996, we were going to incorporate, so we actually had a president for a while, a vice president, and treasury. And we did that for a while. Oh another thing! We had these big, huge annual meetings of the neighborhood, but I was the one left plastering every lamppost in SoHo. It got tedious, you know. And then after a while, I would just kind of make decisions, which I had the good sense of the zeitgeist of what SoHo is, and feels, and what people want. And I rarely—without bragging—I’ve rarely been wrong on what people here want. So I felt I was the spokesman, and only very, very, very few people have ever complained on my actions.

Q: Is there a formal mission, and is there a formal—

Sweeney: No, no, no, no. As a matter of fact, we were going to incorporate as a 501c3, so we did have a mission statement. You have to do that. But then we had to fill out our income tax. And I still haven’t done my income tax for 2022, so I ain’t gonna do one for the SoHo Alliance. I’ve never filed income tax papers in forty years on time! So it just kind of devolved, that effort. And there wasn’t much happening in the late ‘90s here. A little thing here and there with zoning.

By the 1990s, the developers really came down here with a vengeance, so in the ‘90s, there were several developments going on on vacant lots, which people didn’t want. A lot of times it was blocking up their views, which is—okay, you don’t own your view, but I understand. And who

wants high-rise buildings and things like that in a low-rise neighborhood?

Q: SoHo Alliance then doesn't have a staff.

Sweeney: No, it doesn't.

Q: And you provide your services pro bono.

Sweeney: Yeah. Our letterhead says Volunteer Community Association. We fundraise only once a year, at around Christmastime when people are giving, and our expenses are very low. We have about eleven hundred people on our email list, and then that, in turn, gets forwarded to another one or two hundred. So well over a thousand people get this, which is typical. Three percent donate, let's say thirty people. Yeah, thirty or forty people, maybe, only, give. But that's enough, if all you have is an answering machine and no office, really, to speak of. With the money we do get, however, we use that mostly for legal. Our legal battles over the years have been very expensive. The NYU rezoning up here on Houston, we had to give twenty-five thousand for that. The rezoning two years ago, that came up to be over a hundred and fifty thousand. When we sued Trump, that was thirty thousand.

Q: So all of the funding comes from basically thirty people?

Sweeney: Yeah. Except when it's something big, like the rezoning, then you put out a message—sometimes a thousand dollars, five thousand dollars. For instance, when Trump—we'll get to

that later, maybe—when he wanted to build his SoHo Trump Hotel over here. This is 2005, before he got political. But I never liked the guy. I go, “Am I the only one who hates Donald Trump?” So I said, “Can we raise enough money?” It was gonna be thirty thousand dollars to hire a lawyer. “Can we raise thirty thousand dollars in a couple of weeks?” So I googled—Google had just come out—so I googled “the most hated people in America” and Donald Trump was in the top ten. I decide, “Yeah. Let’s go.” [laughs] I swear to God. In two weeks we got thirty thousand dollars.

Q: So a targeted campaign.

Sweeney: Yeah! And then we did another legal challenge against Trump, and the lawyer liked our attitude so much—he was a fighter like us, Stu Klein. That was another thirty thousand, and he did that pro bono. [00:20:00] There were a couple of buildings on Houston Street. The neighbors who lived up there in the surrounding buildings, they would donate, you know, the co-ops. Oh, that’s very important. How did we get them? We’re very lucky, because it’s a neighborhood of co-ops and condos, and they have funds. You always have a buffer account—you should have like six months expenses. So if you live in a neighborhood, let’s say the Lower East Side, where everyone rents, you can’t knock on everyone’s door. You just can’t do it. You don’t have an email list of all your tenants. So it’s really hard to raise funds in a neighborhood of rental apartment buildings. But because SoHo is so small and low, I can even just go around and make fliers, put them on the doors, and say, “Come to this meeting.” And then at the meeting, we say, “We need the co-op to give money.”

For instance, we fought a lot of state liquor authority laws. That's why there's not a lot of bars down here, because neighbors don't want bars open till 4AM. So I had a list of everyone on that block. "If you want to sleep tonight, come to this meeting. Oh, by the way, we need thirty thousand to hire a liquor lawyer." Have your co-op write the check. So that's how we get the big bucks. Also, when we fought NYU, we had a white-shoe law firm, Gibson, Dunn, on the top floor of the Pan Am—Metro Life building. The last I heard, their legal charges were two million dollars. One of their lawyers, Randy Mastro, deputy mayor under Giuliani—a big power man, power player. His firm—Gibson, Dunn—did it for free. We got like over two million dollars pro bono. We just had to come up with twenty-five grand to pay the publicist, and the court filings, and the transcripts.

Q: So going back a little ways, you were first involved with the opposition to the SoHo Grand at 310 West Broadway, in the '80s, and then the Mercer Hotel at 99—

Sweeney: Not me personally, SoHo Alliance was.

Q: I'm sorry. The SoHo Alliance was.

Sweeney: Yeah.

Q: So tell me a bit about the hotel zoning in general, in SoHo, and these two campaigns. And how that sort of affected the SoHo community?

Sweeney: Yeah. This was before boutique hotels. This was when you think of hotel, you think of Holiday Inn, or you think of Times Square hotels. And in those days, Times Square was kind of sleazy. And we also thought it would be a harbinger for tourists. It would bring tourists here, of which there were very few in those days. So we didn't want them because we just thought it would just turn the neighborhood into Times Square. I remember even one of our posters said, "No Prostitutes." It would bring in prostitution. You know, let's say you're having a convention with a bunch of guys, prostitutes might hang around, you might have a drug dealer. So it was a quality-of-life question. We didn't really have anything against hotels.

So the Mercer Hotel was one of the first boutique hotels. And that's really not—there's been very few problems, if any, from the Mercer. And even the SoHo Grand has very few problems. We were wrong on that. We admit we were wrong. And the Crosby Street. Oh wait! Here's an example. So after the Crosby Street Hotel, based out of England, an English firm—Firmdale I think—they came to us first, unlike Trump's hotel, and said, "We're very nice people." And they said, "We're going to have a nice boutique hotel." And they worked with us, and everything we wanted, they gave us. "We'll close the bar. What hour do you want, Sean, eleven?" What the neighbors wanted, not me, I was just the conduit. And it worked out well. And the James Hotel down here. Again, a little problem with sometimes they're noisy, but hotels really aren't a problem.

Q: But—then there was the "Trump" in quotes "hotel." And that was a very high profile case. How was that different? And what happened with that?

Sweeney: Okay. I never watched *The Apprentice*, his show. But I heard that out of, what's the word?—of courtesy—his team, not himself, but his team—asked to give a presentation to the community board. Because they weren't going for any special permits, which you need, but as a courtesy—and he didn't appear himself. In SoHo, let me tell you the problem. In SoHo, you can build a new hotel, and you can live here if you convert. In those days, under the old zoning, you could move in to a former factory or warehouse building, and convert it, and you could live there. [00:25:03] You can live in a converted building as a resident, let's say, and you can build a new hotel. But you can't build a new residential building, until the year 2021, when the rezoning took place. So Mr. Wise Guy comes in, and thinks we just fell off the pumpkin truck. And he goes, "Well, I'm gonna call it a condo hotel, where I'll sell hotel rooms." And I go, "Aw man, don't even do that. Please, don't insult us." And he went ahead with it, and he famously said, "Oh, well, I could go to the community board and it'll take sixteen years. Or I could do it my way and get it done in two." "You think so, Donald? I disagree."

So the building began to go up. And like I said, we had raised thirty thousand dollars in one week cause people just disliked this guy. So we threw everything—we had a great lawyer, Stuart Klein, who was the former solicitor general for the buildings department, and counsel general for the buildings department. He was a brilliant man. And he threw everything you could think of at it. We filed a couple of lawsuits. We filed a complaint with the Securities and Exchange Commission because he advertised on page three of the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* section, at the very bottom: "makes a great investment." And you cannot advertise a real estate investment without registering it as an REIT—a real estate investment trust—with the Securities and Exchange Commission. So we went to the Securities and Exchange Commission. A

complaint there, a complaint with the City Council as well, then we went to—who was it? Cuomo. Andrew Cuomo, I think, was the attorney general at the time. So we put all these complaints into his Offering Plan. And he goes, “Trump had to put down they were being sued.” So who was gonna pay two thousand dollars a square foot to buy into a lawsuit?

Anyway, the building was going up. They had a ribbon cutting ceremony. The police kept us on the other side of Varick Street, and we were protesting. A lot of reporters were there, and I think his daughter, Ivanka, was there. And one of them said, after all these questions, one of them said, “What do you think of all those protesters over there?” And he goes, “Oh, it’s great. The publicity is great. As a matter of fact, I just sold sixty-two percent of my units.” He just picked that number out of his head. Well, some naifs from Europe—a Swedish soccer player, for instance and some other people—believed him, based on his statement, and they purchased condo units. But then all these lawsuits were happening, and they didn’t know this. Living in Europe, they didn’t have a New York lawyer to check this out. So it came to pass that no one else was buying in. So instead of sixty-two percent being sold, I think it was like seven percent was sold. So they sued to get their money back. So he never sold a single hotel unit, to the best of my knowledge. Subsequently, money wasn’t coming in. He just branded it. It wasn’t his development. He had two Russian guys as the actual developers, I’m sure with connections to Putin, so he just branded it. But nevertheless, there was a fifteen million dollar mezzanine loan that they couldn’t pay. And eventually, when he got into politics, the new owners who later purchased it from the Russians took his name off it. So it’s now operating as a nice hotel just like we wanted.

Q: As an actual hotel.

Sweeney: Yeah. He also did sleazy things. He was able to go higher cause it wasn't landmarked. That's why zoning and landmarking are very important for SoHo. He would never have been able to build a building that tall in SoHo proper, in core SoHo.

Q: I believe Donald Trump wrote about this case in one of his books. Do you want to just read me the paragraph?

Sweeney: The title of the book is *Never Give Up*, which he keeps saying. As you know, he still thinks he's president. And he wrote a whole chapter on this. "I Love a Good Fight." Well, so do I! Anyway, he describes what happened from his point of view. And at the very last paragraph, he goes, "SoHo caused, perhaps, a few more problems than expected. But it was all in a year's work, to us. That's big city business, and we're big enough to handle it. Just be sure you have the same attitude. It will save you a lot of unnecessary anxiety." [00:30:03] So when was the last time you heard this guy saying anything caused him any anxiety at all? I want that on my gravestone: "We Caused Trump Unnecessary Anxiety." I hope he lost sleep at night.

Q: Well, that's quite a story. So speaking about historic districting and landmarks, what has SoHo Alliance's involvement in historic districting and in landmarks preservation been, over the years?

Sweeney: Not a lot. Yes and no. We were supportive of the SoHo Cast Iron Historic District

Extension. So SoHo was landmarked in 1973, mostly by preservationists. It was led by Margot Gayle and preservationists. I think the Victorian Society might have been involved as well. The original 1973 historic district went from the east side of West Broadway to roughly, I think, the west side of Crosby Street. But the Victorian Society wanted all of SoHo designated as an historic district—including the west side of West Broadway, going as far as Lafayette—but the Landmarks Preservation Commission wouldn't give it to Margot. After she died, posthumously, I think as a tribute, Landmarks extended it. So we just supported what the Victorian Society was doing. They did at least ninety-five percent of the work.

Q: When was this?

Sweeney: Whew! 20—

Q: Around when was that?

Sweeney: Around 2018. No, no, no, I'm sorry, 2008. Time flies. It was around 2008, 2009 it got extended.

Q: And now I want to move onto a very specific thing, which is *The Wall* by Frosty Myers. SoHo Alliance was involved in that. It's often called "the gateway to SoHo," and Myers created this public art piece in 1973. How is it that it's still there, even after the new owners of 599 Broadway, on the corner of Broadway and Houston, announced that they were taking the piece down in 1997?

Sweeney: For background, Frosty Myers is an iconic, minimalist sculptor. His work was in Max's Kansas City, a really hip, iconic downtown spot. He was one of the, I think, six artists whose work is on the moon. He had little miniature art pieces aboard one of the Apollo missions to the moon. His work is now on the moon. So he wasn't just some sculptor. He was the real deal. His wife, actually, did most of the work. I think that's why I'm not an artist. I don't think the SoHo Alliance could be run by an artist cause they don't have that mentality. I love Frosty, but his wife did a lot of the work.

Frosty and his wife approached and said the new owner of the building wants to take it down. Now, I didn't even know what it was. For years, I had seen it. And it was along Houston Street in those days, before some of these newer buildings were built. There were a whole series of parking lots with wall murals. There was one on West Broadway, one on Wooster, one on Greene, and his work on Broadway, as a result of when they had built the subway back in the '30s. So—I thought that things were there just to hold—which they were—to hold the building up—the wall—because it was actually a double building. But they demolished half of the building in the 1930s, the north half. And they put these girders, these I-beams to hold the wall in place. So—I didn't know much about it because there was no plaque there to denote what it was.

Then it came, because the building was landmarked—I should say, it is in the landmark district—I was on the landmarks committee, and actually, I was the chair for twenty-four years of the landmarks committee of Community Board 2. Yeah, also, I was appointed to the Community Board, which was very important. It's sort of like the mini-congress for each neighborhood, or

the council for each neighborhood. And then I found out what the new owner was trying to do, remove it. And he wanted to put up a big, huge—God, it must have been like a twenty, thirty thousand-square-foot advertising sign for The History Channel to replace this work of art.

And by this time, SoHo as an artist haven was diminishing. People were moving to Williamsburg, the East Village, and Chelsea. So we wanted to preserve that history. And, the name of the building was the SoHo Arts Condominium. It was owned by someone whose family owned the New York Yankees prior to Steinbrenner, and who had a polo tournament out in Southampton. [00:35:05]. So he was getting fifty thousand a month to have this huge billboard. I went, “Man, you have that much money, and you’re gonna tear an iconic artist’s sculpture down?” This was what got me angry. People come in here to pillage.

Oh! And the irony was, he named the building the SoHo Arts Condominium, at the same time he was destroying art. And Landmarks, by the way, I was mentioning these murals on the other buildings along Houston Street, and though some of them were very nice, they had to go to the Landmarks Preservation Commission to have permission to be removed, in order to put up advertising. Which we agreed because the co-ops would get money from it. So okay. But this guy didn’t need money, you see. So it went to the Landmarks Commission, and the commission’s counsel, Mark Silberman, actually said, “Sean, you were pretty lenient or reasonable, giving permission”—not permission, I don’t give permission, but—“not objecting to the removing of the art murals. Frosty’s work looks more serious. What do you think?” And I told him what I just told you. And he basically agreed with us, that this was not just some guy putting schlock on a wall and calling it art.

So they led the charge. We were trying to get people, lawyers, the Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts to help us. Landmarks Commission sued on the preservation of art. There's some kind of federal law, preservation of art, that you can't destroy legitimate art, which is recognizable art. Like Mount Rushmore, you couldn't put a History Channel advertising on that. Then they went to federal court. So at the end of the day—rather than go on, and on, and on—the owner of the condominium building agreed to refurbish—in perpetuity—to refurbish the art work, to renovate it, repaint it. But as a compromise, he was allowed advertising at the very base, maybe going up about ten or twenty feet. So you will see there now three or small billboards. But most of the time, you see the sculpture by Frosty—so it was a compromise. And it's still there! And I actually have a letter from Frosty Myers thanking me. [laughs] He said I saved it from the bulldozers.

Q: Wow. Apparently.

Sweeney: If he said so! His work's on the moon.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE, SweeneySean_20231031_A; BEGINNING OF SECOND AUDIO FILE, SweeneySean_20231031_B]

Q: This is Part Two. This is the reel Part Two of my interview with Sean Sweeney of the SoHo Alliance. Sean, I'd like to talk a little bit about the SoHo Partnership and the subsequent formation of the SoHo Broadway Initiative, which is the BID [business improvement district] that covers Broadway between Canal Street and Houston Street. Could you tell me a little bit about how all of this came to be, and the community opposition to creating a BID in SoHo,

which was first proposed around 2011?

Sweeney: Well, SoHo being in a manufacturing district, was always kind of dirty. And there was litter on the streets. I'm talking about the '60s, '70s, '80s. Then it got gentrified. And in the early 1990s, an uptown fellow, Mr. Henry Buhl—he was the heir to the General Motors or something family—he moved down here. And I guess he thought that he didn't want to live in these kind of conditions, filthy sidewalks and curbs. And a homeless person came to him once asking him for money, and Buhl gave him some money, but said, "You should have a job instead of me giving you money all the time." So he thought of forming the SoHo Partnership to get recovering alcoholics, drug addicts, maybe people who were in jail, giving them counseling, rehabilitation, and employment. That's what they got out of it, and we got clean streets.

Now, Peter Ballantine, who was the carpenter for Donald Judd's sculptures, he was very prescient, that fellow. And he said, "Oh, this is gonna really gentrify SoHo." In fact, it did. Cause now people—I got complaints yesterday—"The streets are dirty. What can you do about it? Should we start a BID?" someone asked me, yesterday! So Henry founded the Partnership—and that's his pet charity, which wealthy people all do. It went well for a few years. He actually invited me onto the board of directors, and we'd have regular meetings. After about five years, I noticed I wasn't being invited to these meetings any longer. I was invited to their annual fundraiser, which was all an uptown crowd, basically. But it was very fabulous, very extravagant. And I'm sure he must have spent half the money he brought in, just on the event, instead of doing something less extravagant—so he was losing money. The Partnership was losing money, particularly along Broadway. Because, in most of SoHo, you have little boutiques

and a lot of residents that would give money. But there were very few residents on Broadway and the big multi-national chain stores by that time had moved in—Banana Republic, blah, blah, blah, Zara. People in Milano, or San Francisco, or Paris, they don't care. They don't contribute. So he was losing seventy thousand dollars a year, I understand, on Broadway. I don't know why he just didn't fund it, take it off as a tax deduction, but he thought he should form a business improvement district on Broadway to clean the streets.

Now, a control freak like Mayor Rudy Giuliani, I don't think a single BID was ever created during his administration cause it had so much power. And BIDs were originally for places like—the original one was Herald Square, and then Times Square. So Buhl wanted to create something that Giuliani thought was too powerful into a neighborhood that's not a commercial center—you can't compare SoHo's Broadway to Times Square. So I knew that BIDs have a lot of power, because they were a direct line to City Hall. They have a budget, I'm not sure what it is now, of a few hundred thousand dollars. Our members are volunteers, and our budget is what we can raise from the kindness of neighbors. So I thought, "This is bad." And it was gonna raise property taxes along Broadway to fund it.

So the people on the upper floors on Broadway, the businesses, which were basically the creative businesses—computer programmers, and photographers, architects, modeling agencies—were taxed to clean up the garbage from the retailers on the ground floor based in foreign countries and not in the city. It just seemed like a really bad idea, so I opposed it. And the SoHo Alliance, I sent out an email to everyone, and I mentioned the detriment it could cause to our neighborhood. It would give them too much power, which, in fact, it does. They have a direct line to City Hall.

[00:05:00] I can't get a return call from Mayor Adams.

So it eventually passed. Margaret Chin, the City Councilwoman, liked it, and she gave the BID steering committee her approval before ever speaking to anyone in SoHo. And she didn't want to lose face, I guess, so when she saw the opposition, she dug her heels in. Eventually, the president of the steering committee, who was an heir to one of the larger real estate development firms in the city, wanted this BID. It was a real estate-driven proposal. Henry Buhl was just sort of like their puppet, if you ask me. He was able to find one co-op that went along with it. So then Margaret Chin said, "Ah-ha! We have residents who want it." So we fought its creation and lost. Fine. Okay. But it did keep Broadway clean, and it got rid of a lot of these illegal street peddlers. And we now are getting along okay, to tell you the truth.

The BID did close off Prince Street one weekend as some "Open Street" event, without asking anyone who lived on Prince Street, about three or four years ago. That is an example of the power they wield: they could close a street. But they would like to close Broome Street—not close Broome Street entirely to traffic, but have some kind of pedestrian mall taking up half of Broome Street. Can you imagine, with all that traffic? So that's the problem with BIDs. And when the rezoning came, the BID supported the upzoning and further commercialization. The rezoning originally started because there were a lot of illegal stores, international stores, primarily. Zara was one, and then there were a few others, Uniqlo. Old zoning prohibited retail greater than ten thousand square feet. So there were several stores greater than that, so we asked the city to put a halt to it. And instead of doing that, they had this rezoning study. And they said, "Aw, don't worry, don't worry." We worried. That's another story.

Q: What were they telling you not to worry about?

Sweeney: They lied to us. Gale Brewer lied right to our face.

Q: And you're talking now about a rezoning study.

Sweeney: Yeah. I'm kind of going off the rezoning cause I want to show you the power the BID has and why it's detrimental. So we thought they were gonna clamp down on retail. Instead they opened up this Pandora's box. We were saying there was gonna be a rezoning, and Gale Brewer says, "No, no, no, it's just a study." At the end of the day, I don't think the BID really cares if artists live here, which concern was part of the rezoning. How do we balance non-artists living here with artists? How do we balance that? Now the new zoning has a twenty thousand square foot cap, up from ten thousand, and it can go up to forty thousand and maybe beyond—and the BID supported that. That's the power the BID has. The city said, "See, the business community wants it." New York is run by business. C'mon, it's the business capital of the country, among the world's top business capitals. So that's the problem with BIDs. I mean, they do good, but they also have extensive power that we don't have.

Q: So walk me through how the rezoning came about, and about SoHo Alliance's role in opposing the rezoning. Why was it so controversial?

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE, SweeneySean_20231031_B; BEGINNING OF THIRD AUDIO FILE, SweeneySean_20231031_C]

Q: So what do you think the future of the SoHo Broadway Initiative, the SoHo BID, will be? Do they have plans to expand?

Sweeney: Well, I'm not that privy to their plans. But I think they got what they want. They do keep the streets clean, and they've done some mitigation on traffic. I think the battle is primarily over with them. I don't see how they could really just keep the streets clean. The prior executive director did want to expand to include the east-west streets. Not expand, but to take control of beyond Broadway. Like on Broome Street, he talked about planters on Broome all the way down as far as Wooster Street, three blocks from Broadway. But he's gone and I think there's a new administration there now, which is a little more friendly. And we get along pretty well now. I think the battle's over, really.

Now, however, again, getting back to Henry Buhl and the SoHo Partnership, I think originally he wanted all of SoHo to have a BID. Cause when I was at one of these meetings, when I was on the board of directors of the SoHo Partnership, his little organization to clean the streets, he wanted to have a business improvement district. This was around 1997. And he did a survey. He mailed out a survey, "Do you want a business improvement district?" SoHo Alliance didn't even react! We didn't even send out oppositional mail. And the next meeting, I said, "Hey, Henry. How did that survey go?" And he went, "Uh, blah, blah." He wouldn't even give us an answer, cause no one wanted it! But Henry kind of likes to get what he wants, so he revived it a few years ago to include all of SoHo, basically, I think, from Thompson, I guess to Lafayette, Houston to Canal. And I thought that would be the death knell of SoHo. Because again, they'll do whatever they want. If they want to turn West Broadway into a pedestrian mall like they did

on Times Square, they probably could. Unless the mayor doesn't want it.

So again, I had to oppose Henry's plans again. His appeal was, "We're just here to clean the sidewalks." And as a result of all the tourists coming now—we must have tens of thousands on the weekend—the streets are pretty dirty. So rather than have a business improvement district, a bunch of us, several of us, around 2017 or so, formed a nonprofit called Clean Up SoHo. And we raised money to hire street cleaners to do basic work. Empty the garbage cans, not just sweep—which is the responsibility of the buildings, by the way. Occasionally, I send an email, "Clean your sidewalk if you're complaining about the dirt!" But it was just so hard to raise money as volunteers, and the key people moved away. We were very influential, the SoHo Alliance. One of its founding members of the Alliance was the Downtown Independent Democrats. And that group helped get Christopher Marte elected to replace Margaret Chin in the City Council when her term was over.

Q: For City Council.

Sweeney: City Council. And I understand he's given some City Council money to ACE, a cleaning service. Maybe once or twice a week they empty the cans out. But some local people aren't satisfied. They bring uptown sensibilities to a downtown milieu. And they complain about dirty streets! I reply, "Clean it yourself!" So Henry got maybe a half a dozen people to push for an expansion of the Broadway BID to include all of SoHo. But Christopher Marte is very responsive to community concerns. There's a nexus between community activism and politics, and in his last election, Marte got sixty-two percent of the vote, council-wide. In SoHo, he got

ninety-two percent! And he knows that, so he listens to us. We could talk about the nexus between politics and community activism. It's very interesting. They go hand in glove.

So I think from what I heard, the BID—I haven't heard any talk for a year or two now.

[00:05:00] Henry's not getting any younger. And although it would be nice to have clean streets, we don't want a mall. We don't want more interference from business interests. Cause no matter what you do, BIDs are going to be fifty-one percent controlled by commercial interest. That percentage is dictated by the law that sets up BIDs. That's the way I'm gonna feel about BIDs.

Q: Okay. Well, I'm gonna move on to the rezoning.

Sweeney: Ooh.

Q: Yeah. SoHo, NoHo, and Chinatown just went through a very controversial rezoning/upzoning by the city. Can you sort of walk me through how this rezoning came about? And then about SoHo Alliance's role in opposing the rezoning, and why was it so controversial?

Sweeney: [whistles]

Q: I mean, you can just give me a—

Sweeney: Yeah.

Q: I know it's a very complicated topic.

Sweeney: Okay. Real estate people, brokers, were concerned that in order to live here, you have to be a certified artist. One member of the household has to be a certified artist. And that has been ignored, basically, since day one. I moved here, I didn't even know about that regulation. I moved in innocently. So I was living here from day one, illegally. As a matter of fact, there's a book about this, called *Illegal Living*. And that's what SoHo is all about, it's all about illegal living. But that's when you were paying three hundred dollars a month. I paid, in 1981, fifty thousand down payment for my loft. People now paying a couple of million dollars get a little anxious if the city were to actually demand that only certified artists could live here.

So real estate brokers wanted to change the artist requirement to eliminate the artists' certification. And we felt that would put pressure on artists to move out, to be displaced. For instance, we heard of the painter who, her odor—a banker was complaining to the landlord, that the odor from her paint was disturbing him. She has a painting in Lincoln Center—Philharmonic Hall, Metropolitan Opera Hall—and this guy's complaining about her. He moves into SoHo—lives next to the artist and complains. And a lady who moved in underneath a sculptor and was complaining about the noise, went on a rent strike. So we didn't want displacement. Then there was talk about affordable housing.

Q: And you're talking now about when they were looking at rezoning?

Sweeney: Yeah, yeah.

Q: So the sort of rezoning study that Gale Brewer did.

Sweeney: Yeah. So what happened, Pete Davies formed the Broadway Residents Committee, partially to oppose the SoHo BID. And when he saw this rezoning, he saw the danger.

[END OF THIRD AUDIO FILE, SweeneySean_20231031_C; BEGINNING OF FOURTH AUDIO FILE, SweeneySean_20231031_D]

Q: So Sean, SoHo, NoHo, and Chinatown just went through a very controversial rezoning by the city. How did this rezoning come to be?

Sweeney: The original zoning in 1971 only permitted residential living here, if a member of the household, at least one member, was a certified artist. But it was greatly ignored for fifty years. Not one person was ever evicted or hassled, really, by the city. But as property values increased, and million dollar lofts were the norm, people didn't want to put millions of dollars into it, risking their investment, and then maybe have to sell it at a loss if the city suddenly started to restrict residency solely to artists. So there was that concern and motivation to change the zoning. And secondly, large big box stores began to move in, larger than the allowed limit of ten thousand square feet. People on Broadway, particularly the Broadway Residents Committee, complained about this. The city ignored it, and when they were actually forced to, because of violations filed—it would take about a year or two to come to fruition—all they got was a twelve hundred dollar fine. So without asking us, the council member, Margaret Chin, and then-Borough President Gale Brewer set up some study. And we said to them, "We don't want a

rezoning.” And they lied to our face. Gale Brewer particularly said, “It’s not gonna be a rezoning.” And we knew it was. We get lied to. I don’t know how they can live with themselves.

Anyway, so they did this rezoning, it opened up a Pandora’s box, everyone got into it. They set up a study group of about twenty or so individuals, from preservation groups, Real Estate Board of New York [REBNY], NYU (which lied, saying it had no intentions of expanding into SoHo—it did, it turned out), artists groups, residents. And we were worried more about preserving the artists here. But also to allow people to move in who were not artists but not to have them force out and displace artists. Living next to an artist can be very difficult: the smells, the noise, their lifestyle.

So they set up this study panel, and they did a report in 2019 giving a bunch of recommendations. Then COVID came in January of 2020—I think the report came out October 2019. January 2020, de Blasio was asked on radio, “What is gonna happen with the SoHo rezoning?” He goes, “Well, we’re having a pandemic. I think it’s too late in my administration to do anything about it.” But in late 2020, some affordable housing advocates put pressure on him to build affordable housing here, and he loved that idea. And the upzoning got passed, which caused an increase in the permissible height allowed. It allowed big box stores greater than ten thousand square feet, almost unlimited square footage. And they allowed non-artists to live here legally, but they had to pay an exorbitant fee of a hundred dollars a square foot to do so—so a twenty-five hundred square foot loft would be a quarter of a million dollars—to go into an arts fund, which we talked about to preserve the arts, during the study. But the money wouldn’t go to preserve the arts in SoHo, it goes to preserve the arts anywhere south of 14th Street. As a matter

of fact, there was a story last week. Someone from the Lower East Side was saying, “We’ve got to get this arts fund study, get the arts fund moving because we want money.” I mean, you’re on the Lower East Side. That wasn’t what the study was about—to fund art projects on the Lower East Side.

So it was a whole shambles, a bolloxed thing, from day one. It was unwanted by us. Even REBNY didn’t want an increase in height, the Real Estate Board of New York. We asked them, “Are you here because you want an increase in the height of the buildings, the bulk of the buildings?” They go, “No.” It was all de Blasio and these city planning people. The head person of that, Sylvia Lee, as soon as it was passed, now works for one of the biggest real estate development companies in New York City.

Q: So are you saying that the city disregarded the results of the zoning study?

Sweeney: In spades. They ignored everything. Yeah they did.

Q: And put forward—

Sweeney: —what they thought, what these affordable housing advocates were pushing.

[00:05:00]

Q: —who didn’t live in the neighborhood—

Sweeney: [laughs] No! I looked up one of them. He lives in a tree-lined street in Windsor Terrace and he wants SoHo to be high-rise. He lives in a three-story brownstone in Windsor Terrace. But he wants your building or my building over here to be like fifteen stories. The hypocrisy of these people. Do you want me to go on? [laughs] The architect of the rezoning, Vicki Been, displaced people—five families. NYU owns the building where she lives. She and her husband worked for NYU. I won't go into it, but they're hypocrites. She displaced a couple of families to move into a brownstone, so she could live there by herself.

Q: So you, apparently, from this interview, you've been involved in many issues over the years, some of which can be called quality of life issues. And others would be more sort of issues that involve the built environment. Do you see all of these issues as preservation issues, including the ones that are not just about buildings?

Sweeney: Well, you preserve buildings and you preserve the character of the neighborhood. They go hand in hand. The buildings end at the building line but the neighborhood begins at the building line. And some of the quality of life issues were—for instance, we had a lot of problems with DOT [Department of Transportation]. They wanted to close Prince Street off—what year was that, maybe around 2005 I'm guessing—to have a pedestrian mall on weekends. And we fought that strenuously. It was a done deal, it was in the *New York Times*. They were gonna close it, and had a community board meeting—they came to us as a courtesy. And we turned a hundred and fifty people out, and it got riotous. SoHo people are like very riotous. At the city planning meetings, the city planners said, "You're the most rude community we've ever seen!" We fought Robert Moses, and when the Mafia controlled all the garbage collection—you know,

we got around them. And we win, usually. So we defeated that proposed mall for Prince Street that eventually went up on Times Square. So that abomination up in Times Square was set for Prince Street.

Also, SoHo became hip in the 1990s [laughs]. The Europeans discovered it and they put up illegal sidewalk cafés, which we thought was just too continental for a quintessential American neighborhood like SoHo. So we fought sidewalk cafés. And bars came in. A lot of bars moved in, cause it was cool and a hip artistic neighborhood. We battled that and there are relatively few now compared to adjacent neighborhoods. Actually, one entrepreneur wanted to open up a nightclub down on 72 Grand Street by Wooster, and he wanted a liquor license. We fought and defeated that. There was a law that you can't have more than three within five hundred foot, unless the public interest is served. But the SLA [State Liquor Authority] was allowing them. The SLA would ignore the law. So we sued and won—the liquor license for the nightclub was denied by the court—and we set a precedent. So now, anyone wants a liquor license they come to us first, and we say, “You're not gonna be open till two, you're not gonna be open till one. Maybe eleven, maybe twelve.” So we kept bars and nightclubs outta here. They all went to the meat market, by the way. Soho House wanted to come down here, and we said, “No! You're not coming into SoHo just because you're Soho House.” They went to the meat market instead, and they called me back a couple of years later and thanked me. And now also, Hell's Square on the Lower East Side is full of bars, and the East Village. So at least SoHo, during the day it's packed, but after seven o'clock at night, it's kind of peaceful, generally. So we kept the quality of life and the character, the residential character, more like the Upper East Side. And Flatbush in Brooklyn is quiet at night. So is SoHo. Other quality of life—we tried garbage—

Q: But these are all issues that you take on, in order to sort of preserve the ethos of SoHo.

Sweeney: Yeah. You know, I don't know, everyone thinks they own SoHo. It's really weird.

[Sighs] [00:10:00] I was at an event like twenty, thirty years ago on the Upper East Side. It was a little party or something. And I met a woman there. She says, "Where do you live." I said, "SoHo." She's, " Oh! I'm a SoHo person." I go, "Oh really? Where do you live?" She goes, "Oh, in New Jersey. But I shop there." Everyone thinks—these affordable housing people think they can tell us what's gonna happen. I never saw a neighborhood anywhere in the city where people think they can control it, they own it, like they do SoHo. So we kind of have to fight that perception.

Q: Okay. Well, we've covered a lot of ground today. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything we didn't touch on?

Sweeney: No.

Q: Well, thank you very much for sharing your story, and for talking about the SoHo Alliance today. I'm going to stop the recording now.

[END OF INTERVIEW]